

Framing "The Liar"

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In *Notes on Novelists*, Henry James discusses, from a critic's point of view, the merits of using a central intelligence, "a large, lucid reflector,"¹ who can lift the narrative "out of the sphere of anecdote and place it in the sphere of drama." Such a dramatized center of consciousness is Oliver Lyon, the narrator of the story "The Liar," whose "highest sensibility, highest capacity and most admirably agitated mind" (406) recommended him as the reflector of the story. However, since Lyon's consciousness is seriously flawed, the direction of the narrative is in every respect also determined by James's effort to realize for the reader that apart from the story of Colonel Capadose which Lyon is telling there is also Lyon's own story, from which the reader must infer the truth about the narrator/hero by penetrating his own beclouded vision and confused viewpoint. For Lyon is basically a self-deceived and distorting reflector whose consciousness controls the narrative perspective, enlarges the narrator's role, and reconstructs his personal character and identity until he overshadows the original subject, Colonel Capadose.

From the start, James dramatizes Lyon's consciousness and discusses his qualifications as a reflector. Lyon is a successful young portrait painter who has been invited to the house of the Ashmores to draw the portrait of the old patriarch.² Like James, who admired above all else the portrait as a form of expression in art and made of it the supreme goal of the writer of fiction,³ Lyon is an artist steeped in the tradition of portraiture whose "favorite diversion (is that) of watching face after face"⁴ (386). As he arrives at the Ashmore's house, Lyon flatters himself that "he had not painted portraits during so many years without becoming something of a psychologist" (409).

Among the guests at the dinner table, Lyon sees Everina Brant, a woman who had once rejected his offer of marriage and is now married to Colonel Capadose. Lyon is shocked to discover she appears in love with a husband who is a pathological liar, whose lying is "a natural peculiarity—as you limp or stutter or be left-handed" (407). Since Lyon is a rejected suitor, his impressions of Mrs. Capadose and her husband are strongly affected by a resentment which casts a reasonable doubt on his reliability as the center through whose con-

¹ Henry James, *Notes on Novelists: With Some Other Notes* (New York: Scribner's, 1916) 406.

² James's enduring interest in painting and his conviction that all arts connect are substantiated by his use again and again of a painter as narrator of his stories as well as by his reliance on portraits to bring out character and tell a story. In the preface to *Roderick Hudson* James speaks of his revisions for the collected edition of his works in terms of the painter's freshening sponge and varnish bottle while in *Picture and Text*, his critical studies of Edwin Abbey, Alfred Parsons, Sargent, Daumier, and others, James discusses subject matters and points of view rather than pictorial techniques.

³ See Leon Edel, *The Conquest of London: 1870-1881* (New York: Lippincott, 1978) 222-3.

⁴ All quotations from "The Liar" are from *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, 12 vols., ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962-1964) 6.

sciousness the Capadoses' case is presented. Furthermore, while establishing a tie between the observer/reflector and the heroine, James complicates and enriches the narrative by adding to the primary story, which reflects on Lyon's function to register the relationship between Mrs. Capadose and her husband, a secondary story which is "the story of one's story itself" and establishes a new thematic interest in developing Lyon as a highly equivocal and interesting narrator/protagonist.⁵

Lyon's story of Colonel Capadose tells of a woman corrupted into dishonesty by her husband, whom Lyon intends to expose by drawing his portrait, which is to be entitled "The Liar." But Lyon's portrait of Colonel Capadose is an interesting frame to the story which specifies what must be understood from Lyon's narrative for the story to succeed. By virtue of its intertextual reference, the portrait acquires significant relevance: Lyon is a portrait painter "most admirably agitated" about his subject and resentful as a result of a former humiliation; and James uses Lyon's artistic ability as a pretext to make the immediate experience of drawing Capadose's portrait into the additionally meaningful circumstance of telling its artist's own story. It is Lyon's own story which enlivens the narrative and relates to the pragmatic experience of its readers, who may fill in, in a reversal of roles, the pregnant omissions of Lyon's composite self-portrait with their own brush strokes. As a result, the reader becomes actively involved in "The Liar," and what is at stake, as Roland Barthes phrases it, is to "faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte."⁶ The reader is forced to reject Lyon's interpretation of the events and to correct Lyon's twisted narrative. Such a framing of Lyon's narrative goes beyond the creation of irony, extends James's control, and challenges the reader's innate passivity.

There is no doubt that Colonel Capadose, whose true character Lyon plans to unmask in the portrait, is "an abundant but not a malignant liar" (411). At the Ashmores' house, and later during the sittings, Capadose tells stories in which "the details always begin to multiply, to abound, when once his companion was well launched—they flowed forth in battalions" (425). James probably modeled Colonel Capadose after Alphonse Daudet's Numa Roumestan.⁷ Like Numa, Colonel Capadose has an inexhaustible capability to romance. Unlike Numa, however, Capadose is a kindly soul, not without an acute sense of humor and the ability to see the faults of his own temperament. Even Lyon is forced to admit to himself that Colonel Capadose's delinquencies do not go beyond the exaggerations of a gifted imagination: "'He's the liar platonic,' he said to himself; 'he's disinterested, as Sir David said, he doesn't operate with a hope of gain or with a desire to injure. It's art for art—he's prompted by some love of beauty. He has an inner vision of what might have been, of what ought to be, and he helps on the good cause by the simple substitution of shade. He lays on colour, as it were, and what less do I do myself?'" (411). Undoubtedly, James makes Lyon and Capadose ironic doubles, one a harmless artist, the other a danger-

⁵ According to W.C. Booth, all the Jamesian stories which develop in this manner exemplify an "incomplete fusion" of the two subjects. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 339-74.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 10.

⁷ The connection is mentioned by Leon Edel in *The Master: 1901-1916* (New York: Lippincott, 1978) 42.

ous one, who lies to himself and the reader. The analogy to fiction should be obvious.

Interestingly enough, Capadose's wife Everina is, like Numa's wife Rosalie, endowed with a candid nature. Her name signifies Everina's access to the truth and her consequent ability to distinguish "truth" from "fiction." On a different level of awareness, Mrs. Capadose's name also illuminates the story's claim to being recognized for what it really is—i.e., a denunciation of Lyon as a vitriolic reflector—and to being treated by the readers as Lyon's fiction about Colonel Capadose's contemptible lying that causes his wife's constant humiliation.

The question of whether Mrs. Capadose is made unhappy by her husband's foible is the central issue of "The Liar." The answer, which is given only at the end of the story, focuses however not on its epistemological implications—i.e., Mrs. Capadose loves her husband in spite of his *bavardice* and his *toupet*—but primarily highlights Lyon's obsessive curiosity, his malevolent interference. Dissatisfied with the discovery of the truth which has so long eluded him, Lyon presses on impelled by an ulterior interest—that of inducing Mrs. Capadose to confess her shame and humiliation. As a result, the reader's interest switches to the secondary tier of narration, which rhetoricizes the "central" story by dramatizing the moral and psychological significance of Lyon's involvement as a protagonist/narrator.

Lyon remembers Everina Brant as a fine specimen of the simple, proud Englishwoman, essentially unimaginative and unsophisticated. As Mrs. Capadose, Everina seems essentially the same, simple and unpretentious in nature. When she confesses to her former suitor that her husband "had not a fault," and that "he is everything that's good and true and kind. He's a soldier and a gentleman and a dear!" (410), Lyon grows increasingly anxious and finds solace in imagining her secret anguish with the most poignant vividness. "That was her pride: she wished not to be even suspected of not facing the music. Lyon had none the less an importunate vision of a veiled figure coming the next day in the dusk to certain places to repair the Colonel's ravages, and the relatives of kleptomaniacs punctually call at the shops that have suffered from their depredations. 'I must apologize; of course it wasn't true; I hope no harm is done: it's only his incorrigible—' oh to hear that woman's voice in that deep abasement! Lyon had no harsh design, no conscious wish to practise on her sensibility or her loyalty; but he did say to himself that he should have liked to bring her round, liked to see her show him that a vision of the dignity of not being married to a mountebank sometimes haunted her dreams. He even imagined the hour when, with a burning face, she might ask him not to take the question up. Then he should be almost consoled—he would be magnanimous" (413-14).

The passage points out the extraordinary mixture of sensitivity and cruelty, of genuine compassion and vindictiveness, which characterizes the workings of the mind of the self-deceived observer. At this point, however, Lyon's reflections in themselves may appear as just self-indulgent wishful thinking—in which case he would be merely a comic dupe. But Lyon, who longs with the desire to force Mrs. Capadose to confess her dissatisfaction with her plight as a

wife, a confession which would amount to an admission on her part that she entertained at least some regret for having preferred the Colonel to himself, presses on and on. He asks that the Colonel sit for the portrait, pretending that he finds his interesting face a subject preeminently suited to his art. The truth, however, is that he wishes to expose Colonel Capadose and thus find an outlet for his accumulated anger: "The desire grew in him to paint the Colonel also—an operation from which he had promised himself a rich private satisfaction. He would draw him out, he would set up in that totality about which he had talked with Sir David, and none but the initiated would know. They, however, would rank the picture high, and it would be indeed six rows deep—a masterpiece of fine characterization, of legitimate treachery" (415; my italics). As Mrs. Capadose lets Lyon paint her husband, his inspiration feeds upon vindictiveness and exasperation. The Colonel's portrait turns out to be the fullest expression of the "Idea of Lying."⁸

Ironically, Lyon's portrait of Colonel Capadose serves in the end to precipitate the crisis and resolve the story's central ambiguity—i.e., does Mrs. Capadose know of her husband's lying and, if yes, does she still love him without feeling humiliated? One day, when Lyon is supposed to be out of town, but in fact returns to witness the scene unobserved, the Colonel brings his wife to the studio to see the portrait. She immediately discerns Lyon's cruel exposure of her husband. Her horrified acknowledgement finally gives Lyon the confirmation he craves—that Mrs. Capadose is aware and ashamed of her husband's peculiarity—and compels her husband, who is clearly incapable of understanding her outburst, to destroy the calumniating portrait.

But Lyon's unforgivable sin is that he is not willing to be content with a proof which has been given unintentionally and unknowingly. The story's crowning irony is that when Lyon exerts more pressure on the Capadoses his "success" turns into a pyrrhic victory. When subsequently he confronts the Capadoses about the portrait, they deny any act of vandalism or wrongdoing. Lyon's last exasperated attempts to strip the "inscrutable mask" off Mrs. Capadose fail completely: "Her hypocrisy revolted him. And yet, by way of plucking off the last veil of her shame, he broke out to her again, shortly afterward, 'And you did like it, really?' To which she returned, looking him straight in his face, without a blush, a pallor, an evasion, 'Oh, I loved it!' Truly her husband had trained her well" (439). As Mrs. Capadose suggests that she and her husband might have saved the portrait, which had probably been destroyed by some drunken model who had wandered into the studio, had they only returned, Lyon cannot resist a last desperate thrust: "'Yes; you'd have saved the picture.' For a moment she said nothing, then she smiled. 'For you, cher maitre, I'm very sorry. But you must remember I possess the original!'" (440). Without removing her mask, Mrs. Capadose conveys to Lyon her pity for him as well as her love for her husband.

⁸ The theme of portrait painting as form of exposure also appears in another story by James, "The Story of a Masterpiece." In this connection, I would like to mention F.O. Matthiessen's claim in "James and the Plastic Arts" (*The Kenyon Review*, 5 [Winter 1943]: 535), that it was Hawthorne who taught James the use of a portrait as a means of bringing out character. "In *The House of the Seven Gables*," according to Matthiessen, "Holgrave's daguerreotype pries beneath Judge Pyncheon's smooth appearance and shows his real kinship to his hard and grasping ancestor."

Lyon had initially entertained two theories concerning Mrs. Capadose's position: either she had been aware of her husband's peculiar lying, and her love had therefore never abated, or if she had guessed the truth, her integrity must have killed her love. What Lyon's arrogant confidence in his own psychological insights had failed to consider is a third possibility in which a highly scrupulous woman, who refrained from permitting her lucidity to quench her love, might depart from her ideal of decency in order to shield the man she loves. Lyon's failure of perception is finally to be attributed to the base spirit of vindictiveness and resentment which had impelled him to press on. His painting of Colonel Capadose's portrait is instrumental in bringing the story to its denouement—which is Lyon's discovery of Mrs. Capadose's life-long devotion to her husband. But the painting of the portrait and its subsequent destruction, followed by Lyon's painfully learned lesson, is a chain of events highlighting a dramatic situation—the story of Lyon's own uncharitableness and arrogance.

In the closing passage to the story, James dramatizes Lyon's final moment of truth: "He would never go back—he couldn't. Nor should he ever sound her abyss. He believed in her absolute straightness where she and her affairs alone might be concerned, but she was still in love with the man of her choice, and since she couldn't redeem him she would adopt and protect him. So he had trained her" (441). It is a recognition marred by irrepressible resentment, to which Lyon gives vent in the last demeaning remark, "so he had trained her"—a remark which Lyon compulsively repeats. This last self-revelatory comment switches the reader's attention from the contemplation of the beauty of the heroine's devotion to her husband to the protagonist/narrator's own drama: he is a man who has failed to assimilate his lesson in devotion because he is so utterly devoted to himself. By dramatizing such a moment, James creates in "The Liar" the same effect of an open ending which allows the reader to weave the various threads into a revealing tapestry that adds a further dimension of truth in fiction and discloses an important connection between narrative technique and fully informed reading.